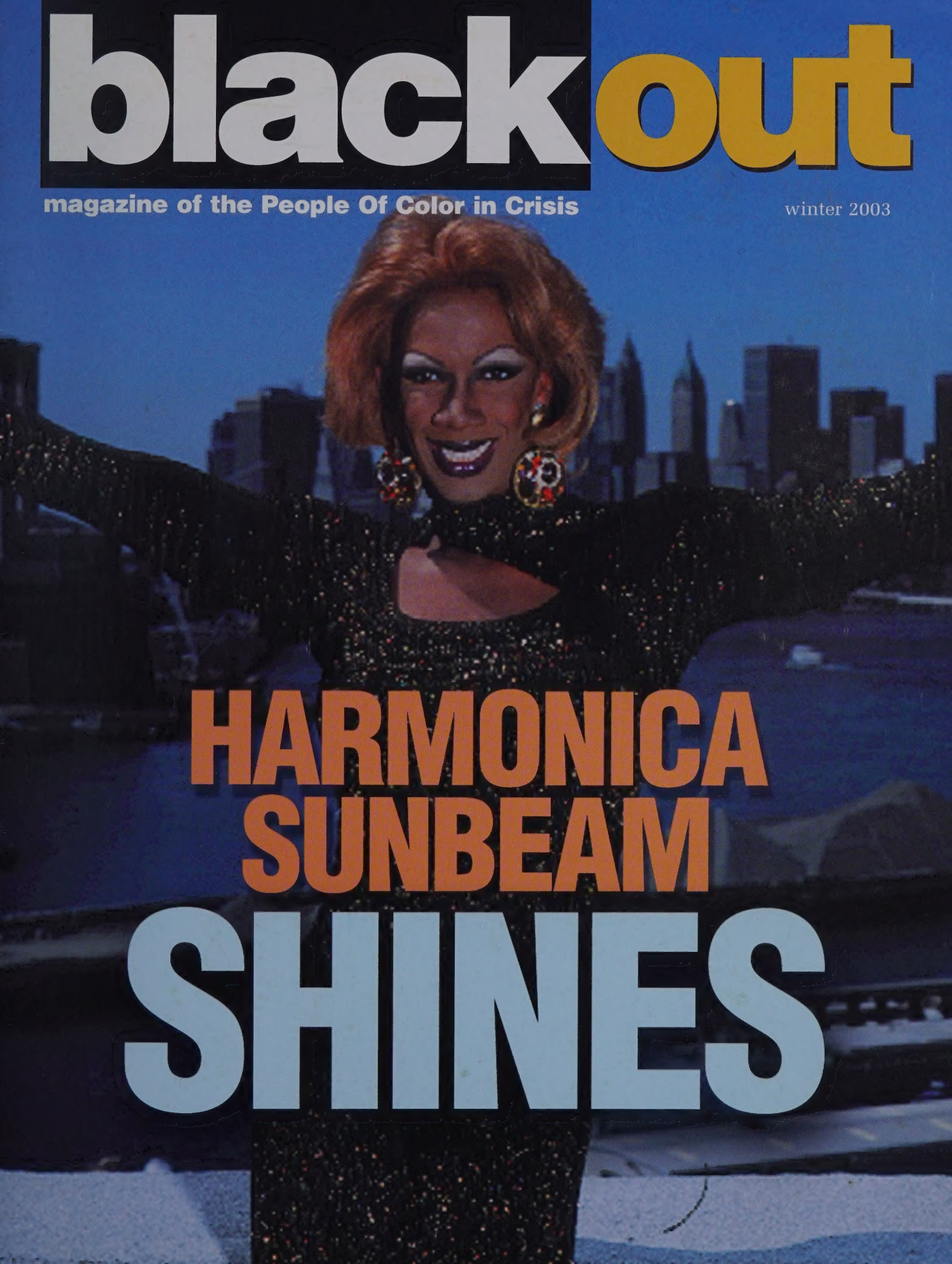
blackout

magazine of the People Of Color in Crisis

winter 2003



HARMONICA SUNBEAM SHINES

table of contents

PAGE 9: WELCOME TO MY WORLD: Harmonica SUNBEAM unmade-up

winter 2002

5 KNIPPED IN THE BUTT: PROTEST CLOSE NYC DRAG "MINSTREL" SHOW__Keith Boykin

9 IT'S A BOY! A FACE TO FACE WITH THE FATHER OF HARMONICA SUNBEAM...HIS NAME DORIAN__Craig Cobb

13 SAVING OUR LIVES__Kevin McGruder

15 DICK AS DOWNPAYMENT__Lawrence Thorne

17 FRIENDS4LIFE: SUSTAINING FRIENDSHIPS WITHIN THE GAY COMMUNITY AMONG GAY BLACK MEN __Sheldon Applewhite

21 THE MOREHOUSE LESSON__Craig Washington

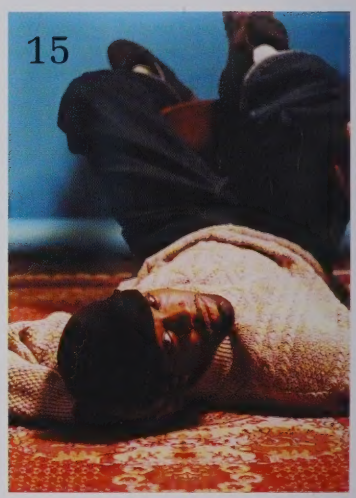
Features

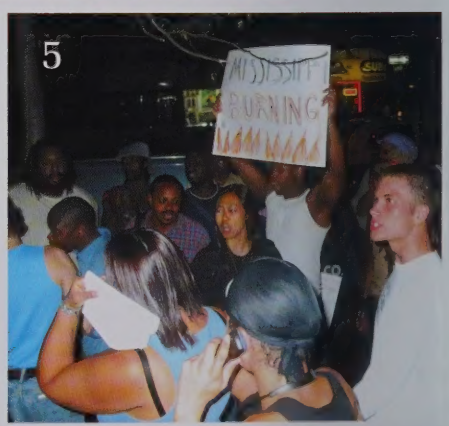
4 EMPLOYEE OF THE QUARTER

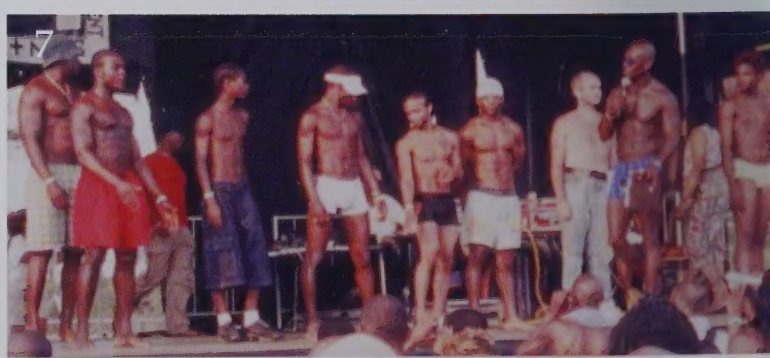
7 NEW YORK CITY'S BLACK PRIDE CELEBRATION

8 WHAT DOES OR DOES NOT LIE BENEATH THE SURFACE__leon a.james

20 LANGSTON'S







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THANK YOU!

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Donations of any size are appreciated and vital to ensuring that People of Color in Crisis, Inc. is able to continue serving the needs of the community. To contribute to the mission of POCC send your checks and money orders to:

People of Color in Crisis, Inc.
468 Bergen Street
Brooklyn, NY 11217

From the **executive director**

Hope that this winter season finds you in good spirits!

I would like to take this time to speak to you about a paramount issue that POCC as an agency is immersed in, particularly the question of POCC's expansion of services to address several areas of need in our community. Certain individuals have called our renewed commitment to the community "empire building ". We here at POCC understand that the LGBT community of color has an array of issues and we do not profess to be equipped to deal with all of these issues. What we are saying is that the issues of the Black gay male community in New York City are vast and that POCC, as an agency, needs to be in sync with these issues as well as how to handle them. POCC's answer to the challenges facing our community has come through an array of expanding services to meet the preexisting and growing needs of our community. POCC provides access to mental health services, services to address the concerns of young gay men of color, and provides individuals the tools to address drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and housing issues. This is by no way a comprehensive list of issues facing our community. Some people tend to get it twisted and tend to perceive this expansion or empire building in a negative light. They see the augmentation of services, and see expansion solely for expansion's sake. This definitely is not the case with POCC. The expansion is taking place to meet the ever growing needs in our community. I would like to take this opportunity to go on the record: if providing an expansion of quality services is what some folks will call empire building, then POCC builds empires! However, this title and its inferences will not deter POCC from continuing to work with our community to address our needs.

Our expansion process has taken us from a space of 1 to 3 offices. We have grown out of our second space due to our ever expanding case load which has doubled in less than one year's time as well as, to accommodated BlackOut, our new magazine publication, which is making people aware of our services and providing a space for gay men of color. It is a big step to expand and we are aware of the dangers of growing too fast. In fact, in the past year we have declined certain projects because they did not fit into our expansion agenda.

To quote NYS assemblyman Roger Green, "AIDS in the Black gay community is our ground zero ". Millions of dollars in resources were given to New York City in the wake of 9/11 to recover from this disaster. AIDS and HIV is just one more tragedy that requires resources, monies and as much awareness from the public that 9/11 brought about. It is time to step up and use the resources that are out there and put them to use to benefit the Black gay community where its needed most! We are aggressively seeking out possibilities in terms of grants and foundations as possible resources. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage our readers to become a resource as well through donating or volunteering at POCC. We are extremely excited about our expansion possibilities and as always look forward to getting feedback from our community on this issue.

Gary English
Executive Director
POCC

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BlackOut is published quarterly by People Of Color In Crisis, Inc., a not-for-profit community-based organization serving the needs of men who have sex with men in communities of communities of color.
POCC offers a wide array of prevention and support services for individuals both infected and affect by HIV/AIDS epidemic.
Although BlackOut is copyright for our protection, POCC wants the material it contains to receive the widest possible readership. Individuals and organizations are welcome to reproduce and distribute the newsletter in whole or in part. We ask that any copies made attribute the material to People of Color in Crisis and contain POCC's contract information.

From the **editor**

This is POCC 's second full color edition of the BlackOut. We were very encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive feedback by way of telephone calls, e-mails or people simply stopping members of the POCC staff in the community to tell us how much you enjoyed the Blackout. Thank you! Wse need your support. BlackOut is a magazine that was created to serve the needs of single gender, gay, bisexual men of color and to ensure that your voice is being represented and we need your participation.

There are several ways to lend your support to the BlackOut:

- Send us your words, thoughts and ideas. These can take several forms through the form of articles, letters to the editor, poetry, or short fiction. If there is a topic that you would like the BlackOut to look at send that in; if there is a feature that you believe important to the lives of black gay men, please feel free to suggest it.
- Become a subscriber for only $10 for the entire year; you will receive the publication automatically. Your financial contribution will help to off set the cost of distribution.
- Join our magazine staff.

BlackOut belongs to you! Its success and future direction depends largely on your financial contribution and your ideas and contributions, as well as your blood sweet and tears. POCC and the BlackOut welcomes everyone and looks forward to continuing to serve our community.

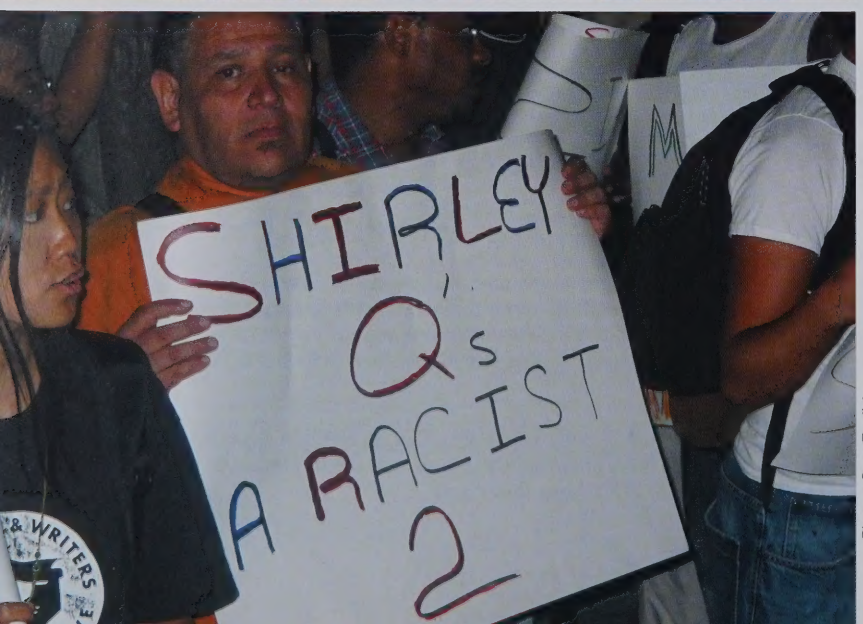
leon a. james
Editor
BlackOut

Employee of the quarter

Oscar Lopez

For this quarter People of Color in Crisis, Inc.'s (POCC) Employee of the Quarter award goes to Oscar Lopez, Youth Coordinator for POCC's Young Men of Color Coalition (YMCC). Oscar has been working with POCC since March 2001 as POCC's Prevention Case Manager, through his hard work and dedication he was promoted to Youth Coordinator for YMCC. Under Oscar's supervision the YMCC program has successfully recruited several young people throughout New York City to explore g/b/t issues among young men of color; they recently started the production of a monthly youth newsletter called X-PLICIT. Oscar has also over seen POCC's HIV testing and counseling program for young men ages 13-25, which has in the course of several short months reached almost 100 young men.

Oscar says that he is honored to be chosen as the employee of the quarter and is extremely happy that he has this opportunity to work with a population that often goes unrepresented. Oscar is committed to making sure that the issues that are important to gay youth of color are addressed. To Oscar Lopez, the Executive Director and the staff at POCC says thank you!



Photos: Gary English

feature

KNIPPED IN THE BUTT: PROTESTS CLOSE NYC DRAG 'MINSTREL' SHOW

by Keith Boykin
Photography: **Gary English, Max Greenberg**

When New York organizers got word last week about a racially offensive performance involving a white man in drag and blackface, they quickly put together a demonstration that helped shut down the show.

But the strategy that worked in New York may not work in New Orleans. With a devoted following of gay men and a nationwide tour, the show's star, Charles Knipp (aka Shirley Q. Liquor), is a popular drag queen who is not going away anytime soon.

Cartoon Images of Blacks

In the 1991 poem "Tongues Untied," Marlon Riggs tells of his experience moving from Augusta, Georgia to the "great gay mecca" of San Francisco, where he "tried not to notice the few images of blacks that were most popular — joke, fetish, cartoon caricature, or disco diva adored from the distance."

Two years later, "Cheers" star Ted Danson provoked outrage when he donned blackface at his then-girlfriend Whoopi Goldberg's Friar's Club roast. Even Spike Lee ran into criticism of his film "Bamboozled" when he used minstrel images to satirize the way television misuses black images. "That's the danger with satire," wrote film critic Roger Ebert. "To ridicule something, you have to show it, and if what you're attacking is a potent enough image, the image retains its negative power no matter what you want to say about it."

If Ted Danson and Spike Lee couldn't get away with it, it's hard to understand why Charles Knipp thinks he can. Yet

Knipp, a white man dressed as a black woman, is traveling the country on a multi-city tour for his "Ignunce" show with his alter ego, Shirley Q. Liquor.

Perhaps it's no surprise that most of Knipp's performance cities are located in the South, but New Yorkers, on the other hand, don't take kindly to old-fashioned racism. That's what Knipp learned when his New York performance was protested and closed last Friday at the View Bar in Chelsea.

The View Bar itself was shut down by police and fined $5,000 for a "quality of life" infraction, according to Gary English, executive director of People of Color In Crisis (POCC), which helped lead the protest. The protesters say they never intended to shut down the View Bar, but they did want to educate the public about the issue. The Audre Lorde Project, New York's Anti Violence Project, and a youth group called Fierce took part in the 50-person demonstration, and groups are now working with The View Bar and local gay publications to discuss greater racial sensitivity.

In a world where discrimination has become more specialized and refined, Knipp's show "is such old racism," complains Michael Roberson, POCC's director of services. "Racism is new and improved today," he says. Similarly, English calls Knipp's act "a minstrel show."

POCC Gay City News Front Cover pic Max Greenberg – courtesy of Gay City

Ebonics for White Men

Knipp does not appear to be concerned about controversy. "Let me axe you," Knipp writes on his website, "What does Shirley Q. Liquor's website need?" If the results are to be believed, just 4 percent think the site needs "less offensive" humor. That may tell you a lot about Knipp's audience.

The site, written in "black English," raises a number of anti-black stereotypes. A fake ad for "Ebonics Airways" reads, "Our stewardesses is not maids, prostitutes or waitresses. Nor is they here to deal with your luggage or listen to your screaming chirren. They also do not fly the plane, so do not axe them 'how much longer till we get there.' Anyone bothering a stewardess will be beaten down and shackled."

Perhaps it's no surprise that some white gay men, who comprised most of the audience at the View Bar last week, love the show. Knipp reinforces preconceived negative images of African Americans that are already reflected in the white gay media.

Knipp reportedly brushed aside criticism about his show's racial content. "To be honest, people of colour who have seen my shows live or heard my CD's overwhelmingly tell me how much they enjoyed my accurate portrayal of a certain genre of the gritty, witty Southern women that they fondly remember, no matter what her race," he said.

Unlike Spike Lee's film, Knipp's routine is not a case of using a stereotype to educate the public. His website suggests otherwise, as he repeatedly identifies black people as "ignunt" and even creates a "compendium of ignunce." Rather than challenging the ignorance of stereotypes, Knipp uses the stereotypes to show why he thinks blacks are ignorant.

If there is a bright side to this story, English hopes the controversy will serve as wake up call for "racial education in terms of white gay men looking at racism in a very hard way." "The missing piece here is that white gay men need to talk to white gay men about racism, because that's there job." English says it's "more impactful when it comes from their own counterparts."

RuPaul Is Wrong

All artists, including Shirley Q. Liquor, have the right to speak freely and produce controversial, even offensive, material. But that's not the issue. Just as artists have the right to perform, so too do consumers have the right to complain, even if the complaints only make the artists more popular. That's why drag diva RuPaul is completely off base with her criticism of demonstrators who protested Shirley Q. Liquor's New York performance a few weeks ago.

RuPaul called the demonstrators "a group of unsophisticated barbarians with misguided rage [who] are protesting and calling for the boycott of one of my favorite entertainers, SHIRLEY Q. LIQUOR." Although he wasn't there at the demonstration, RuPaul labels the group a "self-righteous lynch mob" and goes on to say that as "a black homosexual man . . . I am no stranger to racism and sexism."

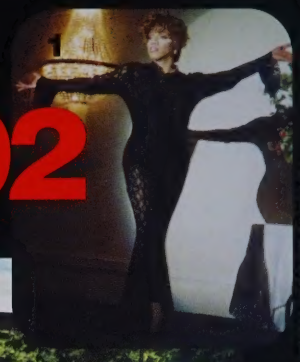
Maybe so, but if he knew anything about black history, he would know better than to compare a group of peaceful anti-racist demonstrators with the violent and hateful racists who strung up black folk on trees. Ironically, RuPaul plays the race card similarly to the way that Clarence Thomas used it to repel his critics during his Senate confirmation hearings. Thomas said he was a victim of a "hi-tech lynching for an uppity negro."

What we're talking about here is the right to disagree with someone who is disagreeable. But conservatives and white-washed blacks have artfully manipulated the race debate so that no one can use the race card except those who make racially insensitive remarks. When liberals cry racism, it's said they're just complaining too much. When conservatives claim racism, it's supposed to be legitimate.

Charles Knipp, aka Shirley Q. Liquor, can be contacted by email at MrsSQL@aol.com or on his website at ShirleyQLiquor.com. b

Keith Boykin is one of the nation's leading commentators on issues of race and sexual orientation. A frequent presence on television, the Harvard Law School graduate has served as an award-winning adjunct professor of government at American University, special assistant to President Clinton, popular lecturer, online columnist and published author of several books and articles. Keith served for two and a half years as the Executive Director of the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, a nationwide nonprofit organization that advocates for the interest of black lesbians and gays. He is available online at www.keithboykin.com.

black pride 2002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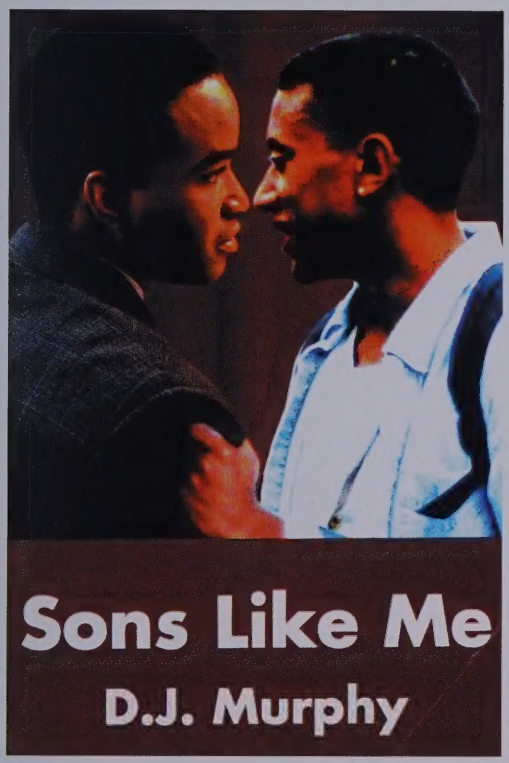
Photos: 1 Jade Elektra as Madam Alberta 2 Bally BB Masc 2 Black Pride Beach Party, Ballys Fitness Best Body Contest 3 Black Pride staff 4 Black Pride Award Recipients 5 City Councilman James Davis Governor Candidate Carl McCall Assemblyman Roger Green 6 Jade Elektra as Madam Alberta, Black Pride NYC 2002 "Generations" Theater 7 On the beach 4 8 POCC Picnic dancing 9 POCC Staff 10 The Cast of Truth or Dare 11 Markeisha St.Clair

This years black pride was a momentous occasion and we have already began planning for next year! If you would like to be a part of the magic by donating your time or financial support please contact **Michael Roberson at (718) 230-0770.**

What Does or Does Not Lie Beneath the Surface

by leon a. james



I must confess that James Baldwin is my favorite author, no reservations. Somehow his pen deftly created portraits of gay love and life that for all the manic, quirky, tortured qualities of his characters I could easily access the passion, vibrancy, life in each. No I've never been the "victim" of the type of circumstances that befall many of his characters, at least not in the way they experienced it. Racism, homophobia, classism all look different in my lifetime than it did in his. However the visceral human experience he portrays is consistently real, even if the context that surrounds them is different. He taught me (and I suspect countless others) lessons on what life is really like when stripped bare, beneath the surface, the true nature of man. In his books he reflected my humanity, the humanity of the man whose touch I would go to sleep at night craving; he illuminated the sometimes sharp, the sometimes distorted and the sometimes invisible silhouettes of people connected in time and space. But James Baldwin died while I was yet a child, and as an adult Caribbean-American Gay Man I often lament the vacuum created by the silencing of his pen. Desperately seeking James, I thumb through random books by black gay men looking for something that allows you to experience the life, held captive in the pages of a James Baldwin book. I prove to be unsuccessful more often than I care to admit; occasionally I will read a satisfyingly "real" portrayal of someone's experience, only to be left greedily wanting more and with a small fear that this sliver of truth will be the last I am able to feast upon. I take it personally, as if some representative voice, MY voice has been silenced.

D.J. Murphy opens his book "Sons Like Me" with acknowledgements to all the African American men's stories that go largely untold - relegated to the dark shadows of silence. He intends to give voice to desires that while occupying disproportionate airtime in the illicit thoughts/wonderings/meanderings of society remains simply that: illicit. It is in this darkness that the ugly, contorted scorn of shame works its magic. Giving voice, making the private public, making the illicit open and real, celebrating the selected experiences and lives of gay black men is D.J. Murphy's objective, and "Sons Like Me" is his tool. It is against this background that we meet the first protagonist in "Sons Like Me", a collection of four short stories.

"Sons Like Me" introduces us to eight different Black Gay Male New York City characters. The first story centers around a young Georgia runaway who gets caught up in the degrading world of prostitution. At the same time he struggles to salvage his humanity and allow the love of a man to save/heal him. The second story portrays a man that for years has denied his sexuality. Married, with two kids, the soap opera that ensnares him finds our protagonist sleeping with the man of his dreams and his wife's best friend. To complicate matters, just as he comes to grips with his long denied sexuality his secret life is disclosed in a public and painful fashion. These events are then eclipsed by a shocking non-sequitur ending that is meant to be thought provoking. The third story was one of friendship, old love (endearing and dead) and new love; this story follows three friends as they deal with their individual issues around race, homosexuality, as well as connection and lose. The fourth story revolves around a young college student as he discovers love and deals with the profound disappointment in his relationships with different members of his family. Secretly he wants to be reunited with his family. The story depicts how his disappointment and long affects his relationship to his sexuality and leads him in some ways back home.

To his credit Murphy creates a host of characters that upon first introduction the reader finds difficult to dismiss off hand, even as the reader may struggle to remain connected to the characters throughout the story, the point is the reader never stops struggling, sets the book down, and goes on with their lives. The desire to not give up lies chiefly in that D.L's characters can be counted in the dwindling ranks of black gay men who are not yet jaded. Even the most distressed and defensive of his characters have SOME hope to be connected with another man, some may struggle against the idea, others may out right reject it, but at some point they succumb to the desire for emotional and spiritual intimacy with another man. The reader is invited to believe in the possibility of connection, of love, of companionship in spite of difficult or painful circumstances. In his zeal to have his message heard D.L. uses a variety of plot twist and turns that would make even the most seasoned soap opera writer blush with envy. In two of his stories the pace was so frenetic that you are tempted to wonder about the plausibility of the situations, even as you remind yourself that real life can be "odd".

Overall "Sons Like Me" provides the reader an opportunity to meet several different variations of the lives lead by African American Gay men. It celebrates black on black, man to man connection and the possibility of love. While the addition of another black gay voice is most welcomed, there is a certain disappointment in the message it carries. D.L. Murphy fails to connect the reader with the characters in "Sons Like Me", the vehicle for the author's message, the characters fight against plot lines that conceal any indication of the beat of their hearts or their relationship to the myriad of events that engulf them. As a result they exist as flat one-dimensional devices, missing is the reader's experience of a rhythm, a beat, a passion –the pulse of the characters. "Sons Like Me" succeeds in providing the reader with a host of hopeful black gay men, if you are looking for a light read it does not immediately disappoint. However, if you are looking for a nuanced and intricately developed plot that encourages you to fell something than "Sons like Me" is not for you. . .might I suggest a James Baldwin Book for you? b

IT'S A BOY!

A face to face with the father of **Harmonica Sunbeam...** his name is Dorian.

by Craig Cobb, Guest Contributor *Photography:* **Samuel Elijah**

I told him that we should speak over lunch, and it was his choice- whatever he wanted to eat, and wherever he chose. He chose a quaint café in the village- I think it was Indian. Whatever the ethnicity, the waiter couldn't get the onion and mayo part together with Dorian's sandwich order, so along came Harmonica Sunbeam. 'O.K., you want mayo lettuce and tomato?' the waiter asked. 'No, again, I said, lettuce...(he writes that down as Harmonica pauses for his attention)...mayo...(he writes that down, and she pauses again)...tomato and ONIONS...(an incredible moment of clarity comes over him, and he scurries away).

Q: How did you get started?

A: I got started about ten years ago. Just coming out and I got involved with the Ball Community, and I walked a Category entitled Butch Queen in Drag for the first time at the Paris is Burning Ball at Traxx down on 19th Street, walked and I won; and after that I went to a couple of drag shows, and said, hey, I can do this. I can give this a shot. It basically started from there. I did a couple of shows, and my friends came out and supported me. It went from there. It was always something I did in my spare time up until 1993 when I left my full-time job and decided to pursue it more aggressively.

The waiter is back. No wheat bread. I thought, just stick it between two of something, and leave me alone.

You just have to understand that I'm doing something that I enjoy.

Q: Well if you've been doing it now for ten years, what makes it successful? If you have to look over your shoulder and see the path, what steps did you take that made all of this happen?

A: What makes it successful for me? I think it's the energy that I bring to the stage- my stage presence and my ability to communicate with people. I don't put myself on a pedestal- it's never all about me. I engage the audience and make the show interactive so that it's all about everyone there. Sometimes- basically, everybody can't handle themselves on the mike- you just have to be able to command respect and deal with all of the personalities that are in the audience.

Q: I have to agree. There's a part of our black gay culture that is so amusing. I have to commend you on your ability to handle an audience. Someone once told me that the ability to influence people to do what you want them to do is called 'Leadership'. Speaking of which, the black gay community is certainly going through a lot of changes with HIV/AIDS, does Harmonica Sunbeam take a position in the fight against HIV/AIDS?

A: Well, for a while, we were doing a lot of work with God's Love, We Deliver, and I advocated for Gay Men's Health Crisis. Once in a while, HIV/AIDS groups ask me to represent their organization in some form or another. I am not always out there handing out condoms, but I am always supportive of the efforts in whatever way that I can get the message across. Sometimes, people don't want things thrown in their faces like forums- some people won't get it- they don't want it. So sometimes we'll sneak it in, and people are more receptive to it when there's entertainment attached to it.

Q: So it's kind of a combination of entertainment and education. We'll call that edutainment. So does Harmonica Sunbeam have a man?

A: It's kind of hard. Especially from my career perspective- a lot of people don't understand you as a person. People, particularly black guys, want you to be absolutely in it all the time or out of It completely. They may say, 'Oh, you might come to my job dressed up'. Well, darling, I don't have a need to come to your job dressed up. There's no value in that for me. I am a man who entertains as a woman, and that's the story. It's very hard, but I find that with the black machismo mentality- people worry less about their own feelings and more about what their friends might think. Ultimately, I want someone who appreciates what I do to make money, and he doesn't have to be my biggest fan. The experience that I have had with men of other cultures- they've been more accepting of it- more understanding of the work that I do. I've also been told that people are very intimidated by me...for some strange reason. I have to find out what the person is attracted to. They may be attracted to Harmonica, or they may be attracted to the notoriety of Harmonica, do you know what I mean? So, I have to make sure that the person who wants to be with me really wants to be with me and not Harmonica. Everyone can be with Harmonica- whether it be for an hour or two or whatever limited time during the show, but you're not going to get Harmonica 24-7.

The food arrives, and I offer to share my French fries. I was surprised that he didn't order his own- what's a sandwich without fries? Fries without a shake? We'll share the fries.

Q: Do you pray over your food?

A: Yes. 'Dear Lord, we thank you for the food that we're about to receive, and we ask blessings as we continue this interview...and...uhm...uhm... Amen'.

Q: You mentioned the difference in cultures, and in my opinion after seeing you perform in different venues, various cultures and ethnicities do respond to you differently. Esquilita's was a great hit. Two Potato was a great hit, and although they have gone through some changes, you have not. You certainly are still Harmonica Sunbeam and are as popular as ever. What happened with Riddler's in the Bronx?

A: Well, first of all, they've never had real shows there, so it would take a lot of time to groom them to the culture of a show. I think individually, there were some nice and appealing individuals there, but collectively, it just wasn't appealing in terms of the audience that I like to entertain- especially when you have a mixed crowd like that- with straight and gay people together- you never know what you're gonna get.

Q: Yeah, I just felt that even with some of your best material, the crowd just didn't get it. It was as if they just didn't get the rhythm or the vibe in your jokes and performance. Are you familiar with some of the issues that young transgenders go through?

A: Yes, of course, I am.

Q: What's your message to them? What advice would you offer them knowing all of the challenges that they face and the potential alienation in their youth?

A: I don't know if it's a message- well, alright, I guess it is. My biggest problem with the transgender community- a lot of them lead very fast lives, and I just have a problem with a person going through all of this transformation just to be a prostitute or a street walker, and how that happens is as young boys growing up- they don't acquire skills, so their sex is all they have. I do know some transgenders who work 9 to 5 jobs, but they have the skills and education to make a living and cross over because no one can deny you if you're qualified. I just feel that it's a sad existence to say 'I wanna be a woman, I wanna be a woman, I wanna be a woman'- and then you just wind up spending all of this money to change yourself just to sell your body as a prostitute. The reality is that you could do that as a guy.

Q: So, for you, it's like the age-old saying, 'The perception of pussy is worth more than pussy itself', huh?

A: Exactly. I have to give them credit. It's a hardknock life. You live in a constant state of fear of what could happen to you next. Just a ride on the train could mean death- it's really hard for them, so I really give it up to them. I think that the gay male community internalizes hate through subgroups of the gay community. The homothugs don't want to be bothered with the sissy boys, and the sissy boys don't want to be bothered with the drag queens. It's ridiculous how we internalize hatred towards one another. At the end of the day, we're all gay, and it takes all sorts of people to make a community. We just have to respect one another- we don't have to agree with everything that everyone does or is, but just keep a mutual level of respect for it.

Q: When you say that we're all one, it brings to mind Black Pride. What did you do that weekend? I know you worked your ass off, huh?

A: No. No, I didn't. For Black Pride, I usually go to Amsterdam. Prior to Black Pride's start, I would always go to Amsterdam for regular Gay Pride, then when Black Pride started, I decided to stick around the city. All of these organizations call me prior to Black Pride for various fundraisers all year in preparation for Black Pride, but when the weekend comes, there's no work for me. If I can donate my time and energy for a fundraiser done months before, then throw me something back when the event comes. It just doesn't make sense to me. I won't be in Amsterdam next year, so we'll see what happens.

Q: Now, I have had the pleasure of seeing some of your friends perform, and I think I remember upstate somewhere when you had a friend help you with a show. It might have been Buffalo or Albany, but it was great, and you worked the entire ballroom.

A: Yes, she was someone who I recommended to do some work in Brooklyn recently also. She enjoyed it.

Q: So, who's your favorite female artist to perform?

A: I really don't have one. If you look at my shows, you'll see that I do a lot of Whitney Houston, but I really don't have a favorite- I'm not the starstruck type. It's all about how the material- whatever material it is- can enhance the show. Some performers are really character people- they master the moves and all of that. I've never gotten into that. I am more of a personality- I'm not trying to be Whitney Houston; I'm not trying to be Gladys Knight, or Dionne Warwick. It's Harmonica Sunbeam doing a take on these people as opposed to me trying to impersonate them.

Q: If you could change anything, what would you do?

A: I wouldn't change a thing. It's all about the experience and growing from each interaction-the ups and the downs- you need them all to grow.

Q: And where will you be five years from now?

A: It's hard to say, but...I guess with continued effort and a positive outlook...in this kind of business, if people feel that you're marketable then, the sky's the limit as to what you CAN do. I'll use RuPaul as an example, she herself was a drag artist. Once the record came out, it led to the VH-1 show, which led to a couple of movie appearances, and she still performs; she's not in the limelight like she was before, but the girl still works. So, we'll see what happens. I've done a couple of movie appearances and some other works, so I keep my hopes up, and we'll see what happens. A lot of people say, 'well, you should do this, and you should do that', but if they don't have the resources or connections to get me into it, then it's talk. Trust, I'm not just sitting here twiddling my thumbs- I'm out there marketing myself.

"Well, **I have** h
issues with
calling **me** by
when I am

Q: So, you've been on Christopher Street for a while, now; what do you think about the gentrification of the neighborhood, and what of the youth on the streets?

A: I think it's slightly sad. Now, I don't hang out there, but I see it. I partly blame the city because they closed the pier, which is where I used to hang out when I was younger, but they closed that, and now they're trying to move us from Christopher Street. I also understand the perspective of the residents- I mean, they pay all of that money for those tiny apartments, and they likely don't want people sitting and yelling on their door steps. People can't come out of their doors, and there are some issues. My only problem is that they didn't make it an issue when the patrons were white. Now, though, there are drug dealers selling drugs along the street, and that brings on a whole host of issues.

Q: Are you doing Langston's in Brooklyn?

A: I am starting there Tuesdays in September. I'm looking forward to it. I hear I have a lot of fans in Brooklyn, so we'll see what happens.

Q: You really don't advertise, do you?

A: Yes, of course; I have to. People have to constantly be reminded. Just

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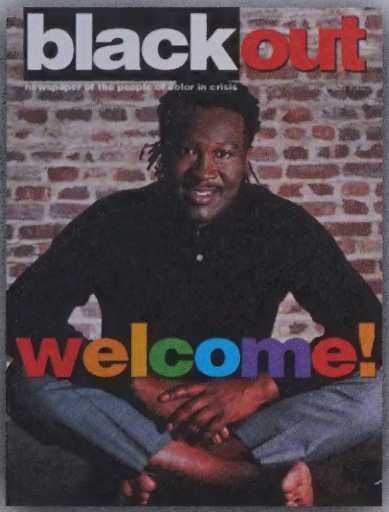

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mentioning it, people forget by the time they leave the bar, so yes, I must advertise and promote my shows.

Q: Do you have any advice for young aspiring performers?

A: Be original; be creative; do what makes you happy. Look, Listen, and Learn. You will come across many people along your path- people who will help you, love you, hire you, and hurt you. It's up to you to determine how you will grow- what you want to do with this, and it's up to you to decide whether you are going to let these people help you or hurt you.

Q: Let's talk about the spiritual part of Harmonica Sunbeam. Looking at you on stage, it can't be the you off stage- you can't be the tongue in cheek slap-happy person all the time. Is there a spiritual base for Harmonica?

A: Oh, yeah. I've been through a lot of ups and downs in my life, and I

ad **some major** people **Harmonica** **not** dressed."

value my family greatly- they have been very supportive. I use my performances to indirectly or subliminally give a positive message to my audience. Like for example, one person who came to the stage sang a gospel number, and later someone e-mailed me and felt that it was inappropriate to sing gospel music in a club. Some people who don't go to church need the church to be brought to the people. I've done and will continue to do a gospel number myself once in a while, and I have no problem with it. It's just me or that person expressing how they feel at that moment. It's not meant to offend anyone. You never know what people in the audience are going through, and who your message is going to touch, so I have to talk about what I believe- and represent what I stand for.

Q: Is it a lonely life?

A: Lonely? No.

Q: You don't live your life as a drag queen, huh?

A: No. I am a man. When I meet people as Dorian, they say, 'Oh, you're so shy' , and they expect a show all of the time. If I gave you a show all of the time, you'd never pay to come see Harmonica. I enjoy the work that I do, but I also enjoy stepping back from it- I enjoy my life as a man.

Q: Is this your full-time work?

A: No. I also work a part-time job. You can make a living doing full-time drag, if you have the following and the support.

Q: Is your family supportive of your work?

A: Yeah. My parents are deceased, so my sister and I are very close, and she'll come to a show once in a while. She's supportive. At first, she had some issues, but she came together.

Q: They respect your work?

A: Yes. I hold them to the same standard that I would a guy who I might date. A lot of guys say, 'Oh, you're a really nice guy, and I'd date you- if only you weren't doing the work that you do.' Well, I'm not going to change my life for YOU- for anyone in that case...family, friends, or lovers included. You just have to understand that I'm doing something that I enjoy. How many people can honestly say that they are doing something that they really like doing and get paid for it? It's not illegal, and I make good money. People love me for doing what I do. Not many people have all of those elements to their job or their life. You either have to deal with it or leave me alone...basically.

Q: So, love you or run like hell?

A: True.

Q: Do you have a lot of friends?

A: I have a few. You can tell people who really know me by asking them my real name. Lots of folks say, 'Oh, Harmonica and I go way, way back', and if you ask them my real name, they have no response.

Q; I have to say that I am truly intrigued by the fact that you live your life as a man. You are a man named Dorian, and that's how you live your life.

A: Well, I have had some major issues with people calling me by Harmonica when I am not dressed. One, years ago, people didn't know who I was, and they would whisper about it when I came into the room- 'Oh, that's Harmonica'- which I don't mind, that's going to happen. I would prefer people not to call me Harmonica, when I am not Harmonica. People say, 'well, I don't know your name', and my response is that I don't know your name either, but I don't say, 'Hey, Miss Thing", so give me the same respect.

Everyone in my life or that you may see me with, may not know what I do.

Q: For all intentional purposes, your name is Dorian, and Harmonica Sunbeam exists on a stage at specific and pre-arranged show times, huh?

A: She has made a couple of movie and video appearances, but to answer your question, Yes. Harmonica Sunbeam is not caught up in all the cyber-space craziness of today; there's no website; she doesn't do e-mail. Dorian has e-mail, and he uses it for business purposes usually. It is TRAKK13@aol.com.

Show your love and support for Harmonica Sunbeam. Dorian is a creative, spiritually-grounded black gay man who is gifted with a unique talent. We are fortunate to have him in our midst.

Craig Cobb is the President and Founder of CommuniCobb, a communications firm that helps non-profit and community-based organizations thrive. Among his professional affiliations Craig sits on an Expert Panel for the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention as well as serves as a consultant for several non-profit organizations. Craig is a long-time community activist and friend of POCC.

Saving Our Lives

by Kevin McGruder

I want to start an organization to save my life. If whales, snails, dogs, cats,Chrysler and Nixon can be saved the lives of Black men are priceless and can be saved.

These often-quoted lines from "For My Own Protection" by Essex Hemphill reached a wide audience when his poem appeared in Joseph Beam's landmark 1986 work In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology. Across the country, Black gay men, decimated by HIV and AIDS responded to Hemphill's message, or their own local variations of it, and began forming organizations. In New York, Other Countries writing collective and Gay Men of African Descent were begun in 1986. People of Color in Crisis was formed in 1988. Later, in 1998 the New York State Black Gay Network was formed. Similar organizations were developed in other major cities. Most began as volunteer organizations, social groups or fraternal organizations, but by the mid-1990s several were receiving funding from private and governmental sources. In 2002, there are organizations serving Black gay men in many major cities, and some smaller ones throughout the country. But Black gay men are still dying of AIDS-- at slower rates-- but dying nevertheless. Why? Lack of resources?

Clearly more resources would allow for new organizations to be established in underserved areas, and would provide underfunded, existing organizations with a greater ability to offer services. But I believe even with more resources, organizations serving Black gay men will continue to fight an uphill battle in regards to HIV prevention unless we as a community are able to more clearly, and visibly articulate the diversity that exists in black gay culture today and find new ways to nurture this diversity.

In the "Promiscuous Papers" ("Blackout June-July 2002) writer Henry Washington (?) quotes gay anthropologist Ralph Bolton regarding HIV prevention efforts:

Resistance to limiting the number of partners was sure to arise because the sexual liberation for which gay men had fought so hard included the right to be promiscuous. Promiscuity was a key feature of gay culture as it evolved, and attempts to extirpate promiscuity could be interpreted as an attack on gay culture and gay liberation.

I believe that Bolton's observation, made in Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men by Gabriel Rotello, was fairly accurate for that time (early 1980s). A preoccupation with sex would be expected of a group that is identified by its sexual orientation and traces its most visible mobilization to 1969, the middle of the sexual revolution. But Rotello also notes that in spite of this history nonetheless "many gay men followed the advice to reduce partners." The references in Sexual Ecology refer to the broad (white) gay community, which in addition to creating organizations to implement HIV prevention efforts was also creating organizations to meet political, legal, media, and social needs. These organizations were implicitly telling their constituents that "while sex is important, we are about more than sex." During this period black gay men were struggling just to create organizations. Black gay men are also about more than sex, but that message is more difficult to discern without visible organizations outside of the field of HIV prevention. In their absence, the most visible image has been our sexual activities. But black gay culture is rich and diverse.

What is black gay culture? For those of us who are not anthropologists, our perception of our culture can be thought of as our answer to the question "What does it mean to be _____?."

As people of African descent we have grappled with the question of what it means to be Black throughout our history in America, just as the hip hop community grapples with it today when they note that they are "keepin' it real." But for most of our history in this country the public face of our culture both for African Americans and gay men has been defined by others-- media which typically selects the salacious extremes of our communities and suggests that they are representative of the entire community. Why is this important? If black gay men have interests as diverse as any other community does it matter how others portray us? I believe it does. For many of us, how others portray us is how we think of ourselves. I do believe that the narrow image of black gay culture that black gay men and others receive is one of the obstacles to bringing about change in the black gay community that would reduce HIV infection rates. If some of us, who are not aware of black gay men's diversity of interests, believe that we're only about sex, then that belief dominates our existence, even crowding out romantic or fraternal, brotherly, love for each other. This visible, restricted perception of what black gay culture is, is also the image with which many black gay men coming out in their teens or twenties are confronted. As they begin asking themselves the question "What does it mean to be black and gay (what is black gay culture)? The answer they are receiving is "chile it's all about sex." Considering this scenario it should not be surprising that HIV infection rates are highest for black gay men between the ages of 18 and 24. We need to change this.

How does a community change the perceptions of its culture? This sounds like an insurmountable task, and while it is an ambitious undertaking, we do have an example from history. In 1919, people of African descent were dying in great numbers across the America, in big cities and small. African American men had recently returned from fighting in World War I with high expectations that their service would be rewarded with expanded access to the rights that white citizens took for granted. In 1919 black people were not dying of disease, but from racial violence as the white community took steps to make sure that African Americans understood their "place". Returning soldiers were lynched in uniform, men and women were burned out of their homes, people were shot in the streets by white snipers. The summer of 1919 became known as the Red Summer because of the African American blood that flowed through the streets.

In When Harlem Was in Vogue David Levering Lewis recounts the Black community's response to this violence. African American leaders, most of whom had eventually encouraged Black participation in World War I after much debate felt betrayed by the white community, but they also understood that the white community was responding to its perceptions of what they thought black culture was-- who they thought black people were (rapists, subservient, uneducated). As Lewis notes, these leaders developed a conscious strategy to expand the perception of who Black people are by laying the groundwork for what has become known as the Negro Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance. They encouraged writers, artists, musicians to create work, and they sought ways to make this work visible to the white and Black communities. While there is an ongoing debate on the success of the Harlem Renaissance effort, the fact that we continue to speak of it and its participants (many of whom were same gender loving men) eighty years after the Renaissance began, indicates that the strategists' goal of shifting perceptions of black culture had some success.

This example may seem far afield from the matter of Black gay men dying of AIDS, but it really is not. Black gay culture is diverse, but many of us, and particularly those outside of our community don't understand this. Our culture includes writers, business owners, politicians, musicians, those who work nine-to-five jobs, pay taxes, support our families and contribute to our communities, as well as those who live for the clubs, the pier, and sex parties. Fourteen year old Black gay young men need to know as much about these other parts of our culture as they do about clubs and sex parties. They won't know these things unless Black gay men begin to tell our story more effectively. Just as the Black community in 1919 understood it was up to them to change perceptions of African Americans, it is up to us to tell our story of how diverse black gay culture truly is.

How do we do this? Taking a page from the Harlem Renaissance handbook we can do more and publicize what we are doing. We can write about our experiences more-- in fiction or nonfiction. Apart from writing about our experiences we can use some resources that our Renaissance brothers did not have available, particularly film and television, to tell our stories. The movie "Punks", about a trio of very different Black gay men who are close friends is an example. But our presence on television, probably the most powerful medium, in anything more than comic relief characters, is still close to nonexistent. Black gay men in positions of power in the industry could change this. We can also do something that the Harlem Renaissance did not do: continue to strengthen our existing institutions, and support the development of others. Since social life is an important part of our culture, we can strive for more ownership of the social venues that serve us.

While we do have beginnings in many of these areas, why haven't we done more and why don't we hear about these activities as much as we do about sex parties? Part of the answer is related to a lack of resources and lack of black gay influence and decision making power in the institutions that make decisions on what gets produced, established and publicized. But I believe another reason is that as we began to create organizations to save our lives from HIV and AIDS we did not fully realize that to effectively accomplish this we needed to work on many issues of black gay culture seemingly unrelated to AIDS. The organizations that began as volunteer agencies now receive funding, but the funding is primarily for HIV and AIDS related activities. We should encourage these organizations to seek funding for other activities as well, such as education, advocacy, the arts, etc. and we should participate in the funding of these organizations by becoming contributors to them if we aren't already. If it isn't practical for these organizations to expand their base of activities we should seriously consider establishing other organizations that can focus on the other aspects of our lives.

What does it mean to be a Black gay man? If we are successful in our efforts to expand the image of Black gay culture, in the future, the fourteen year old Black gay young man just coming out should be able to see some of himself in our answer. And if we are truly successful, the seventy year old Black gay man listening to our response to this question should be able to find himself in our answer as well. Understanding that we are about more than sex and providing and publicizing a wide variety of activities and institutions in which Black gay men can meet and participate will have an effect on HIV infection rates, as HIV prevention messages previously provided in isolation will be provided in the context of a concerned community with whom Black gay men interact regularly.

For inspiration in making these changes we don't need to look as far back as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s or even to Essex Hemphill's work of the 1980s. We can look to ourselves, right now. In Lyric: Poems Along a Broken Road, a poet of our times, G. Winston James has written in "Uprising":

I want to start a campaign
One that gets homosexuals to recall
What it means to be gay
A campaign that will scrape away
At millennia's worth of stone
To unearth the legions
Of sissified warriors
Who lived, died
And worked their magic
In, on and about this world.

Let's start a campaign to save our lives by expanding the image of Black gay culture.

A Native of Toledo, Ohio, Kevin McGruder has worked in the field of nonprofit community development for over twenty years. He was Executive Director of Gay Men of African Decent from 1997 to 2001, and prior to that was Chief Operating Officer of the Abyssinian Development Corporation. He is currently a student in the doctoral program in History at City University of New York, and is co-owner of Harlemmade gift shop in Harlem. He has a B.A. in Economics from Harvard University, and a Masters in Business Administration from Columbia University. (c) 2002 Kevin McGruder

dick as down payment

by Lawrence Thorne

I never knew the power people surrender when they permit penetration. The power dynamic in same-sex relations is cunning, illogical and fickle as hell. Men expend excessive amounts of energy to mock the assumption of passivity, cloaking their desire in bravado and nonchalance. I question the motivation for such a well-scripted performance when in the end someone must forfeit his male privilege and take the dick. If you are new to the game, the memo that seems to have been circulated, but perhaps you didn't fully comprehend, is that as a black man you must, it is essential, maintain the myth of sexual dominance at the expense of your self-esteem. To not play into to it ensures severe public ridicule. You must maintain and invest in the deception, or at the least, put some dick down as down payment to assert your masculinity.

Giving up the ass to the one who dominates; beating up that boy-pussy, breaking you down, digging you out, gutting you to utterance; a moan of blissful submission are some common feelings associated with the ideal of gay sex. The ass must be overpowered, to give it freely is to undermine its value and elicit personal and public shame. Which has an interesting HIV behavioral component to it. The prerequisite stonewalling on showing any interest in desiring to be penetrated creates a coffin of contradiction and shame at the possible expense of personal satisfaction. This brother is feelin' you. You appear aloof, remote, stoic but approachable; not too fruity but open enough to engage a brother in polite conversation. You want the brother deep inside, your mind pops and your body is a stew of hormones, but your at a loss for words and fumble. After looking so collected, if you let him know that you want him you risk appearing to be a "cum-hungry bitch" or "thirsty." You need but hear this once in public and you will butch-up no matter the cost. Being in a constant state of denial permeates every action so when sex is consummated, here again we rely on our stoic disinterest to dissuade any conversations on protecting ourselves. It's cute for about a minute but then it's all down hill from there.

How many times have you heard, "He the man", "That's my nigga" or "He ain't man enough to get on my back?" It illustrates this shift of sexual power and its significance in self-perception. Self-proclaimed bottom boys are light and white; we allow that. A designation they claim with shame as the remotest of concerns. Public and personal stigma is greatly reduced since the assumption is that all races pale in the presence of anything black. One hour at your local bar the racial/sexual stereotyping plays out very plainly for all to witness. A brother equally inclined to milking the monster, even amongst his own kind, must have in his compact along with safe-sex savvy; graduate degrees in choreography, lighting and design, scene study and character development, to project an image that won't taint him publicly. There is no mention of who then addresses the psychological aftermath of all this role-playing. Did someone say DL phenomenon?

A sometimes obsessive preoccupation with size, along with who's bottom skills are honed well enough to take that magnum ten. Who's doin' who? Who would be the man in the relationship are some of the common whispers when sizing up folks who we're not even serious about. Countless, comedic revelations by butch-queens about the supposed man who flipped when he peeped a brother is packin' something bigger than him. The power shift made manifest right before our eyes, the plot revealed, the illusion dispelled as a game of bait and switch.

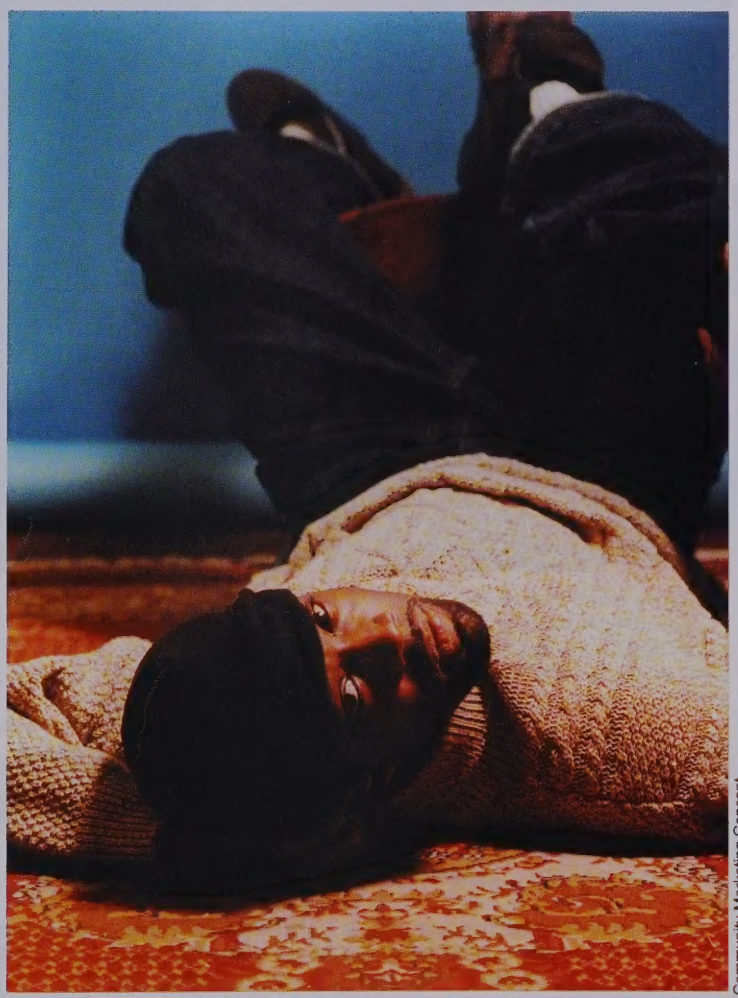
From the Personal Archives

Richard and I swung an episode at a sex party. He finished up what another brother had left undone. After escorting me to the bathroom to clean up he waited outside to actually see who he was messing with. He had mad (many) questions, "Yo, your body is tight man, where you workout."...."So, where you live...Manhattan...yeah ...you look like an uptown man." Anyone who knows me knows that I'm severe to a fault at times and make little allowances for typically timid social discourse around issues of gay sex. Richard was profuse in his application of the West Indian tough guy, "Om uh man....me om

The general pecking order says the bigger the muscles, the bigger the dick equals masculine privilege.

Trini, man, yo, I'm Trini!" At every turn deflecting as if he and I were of a different sex and didn't possess the same anatomy. I peeped his Lois Vuitton (luggage) but let him have it in the nicest way I knew how. Richard was packin' a nice piece, but somehow the boy thought that it was the eighth wonder of the world. My boy who was hosting the party is notorious for his wild, man-rape fuck sessions, breaking backs with a resounding "thwack." His fuck style is straight up violent; he hits hard and swings a ten and one-half inch bat. Richard was the beneficiary of such VIP fuck sessions on the one-on-one, so, he had truly been bitch-fucked. And did I mention that my boy gets down raw; no use of the latex for his boys with most sessions ending with him busting a nut in their ass.

Richard somehow in his mind musters up the nerve to pump up to me and sell me this bag of bull, inferring that he is all man and from Trinidad to boot, which should for some unknown reason, impart him with twice the mandingo masculine magic. I share this to say, that on the face of it, Richard was the baby's daddy but hell, ya'll know we as gay folks are masters of deception and that a face that reads gay is not the face we want staring back at us. It is a reflection that we spend countless dollars to modify and mold to harden the gay edge.



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Hitting me off at the fuck function was Richard's way to say, in his own twisted way, which is so common its ridiculous; 'now that I've proven to you I am not a pussy would you hit me off too…ya know …how I tagged that ass. I want you to take what we did and use that as a down payment on our next session when I can be bitch-fucked without any backlash.' Richard has become more relaxed about his sexuality engaging in group-sex being the only bottom; taking the dick OZ-style. He is not using condoms. His status is unknown to me.

But the power he surrendered to me was intoxicating. I could have this thug Trinidadian take my joint all night long grooving, responding to every shift of my hips, letting me know that I earned the right to have such a masculine piece of ass. How many brothers you know say they ain't this or that and then some twist of fate it comes out he's been getting that ass blazed by some notorious negro? How many brothers you know got caught out like Richard and thought just 'cause a nigga packin' a big dick you were obligated to give up the ass? How many brothers don't even question stuff like this, I mean, who do you talk to, are you even aware of this dynamic? Are the general feelings of being inferior to straight boys so pervasive that any facsimile, even if we know it's an act, means we are destined to engage in this and other passive suicidal behaviors?

Some of Me

Often when I allowed myself to be penetrated several unspoken truths were revealed to me. Size and age matter and are used as designations of top or bottom. Older men I encountered at the local tea rooms (back in the day) sniffed out my chicken status approaching confidently, knowing that I'd never get the chance to taste the power of traditional sexual dominance. My need for connection was voracious and so was my need to comply. So, new to the game, I never thought beyond what was offered to me. Interestingly enough, white men generally offered their asses for exploration voicing their wishes for submission without shame. At first, having grown to enjoy the physical sensations of anal sex, I grew pensive, cautious and ashamed. The words, hearing the words; dictated to me in such fluid unrehearsed desparity gave me insight on the greater social value of being a top. I immediately identified with this darker sense of sexual longing verging on an unusual extreme I hadn't experienced but was ready for. Withdrawing from my natural urges I began to invent a persona that would soothe my self-esteem and upgrade my social status from solely a bottom boy. All of this was in my head no one ever dismissed or mistreated me, in fact, they showed great appreciation for my enthusiasm and significant compassion for my shortcomings. I was woefully inexperienced or to be exact, I was sexually inept in the powers of relaxation to accommodate the rigors of being a bottom.

Now all that has changed. The roller-coaster ride that was my self-discovery is not nearly as bumpy or so frenetic that I can't see beyond my need to have sex. I'm cool with knowing that age, dick size are components of sexual attraction and that I need not obsess over what they might mean to other people. The general pecking order says the bigger the muscles, the bigger the dick equals masculine privilege. But hey, news flash boys and girls; we have a special insight in what is to be masculine and feminine, to take the dick or make it spit. Now, in all my sexual escapades my down payment of the dick is just a way of ensuring that I get what I want; more about reciprocity than asserting the singleness of my sexual intentions. I no longer feel just 'cause a brother looks masculine that he isn't poised to be penetrated, even by me. Vanessa Bell Armstrong wails in traditional gospel style "The secret is out! Oh, the secret is out" and I chuckle at its ironic yet literal translations in reference to myself and gay rituals and rites of passage. The secret is out- put some dick down and you might get some. The balance of sexual dominance need not mean a life where tops are blindly revered because how well they convince the world of their taste for the ass is all consuming affirming their masculinity. The balance of sexual dominance need not mean the brothers who back up on the dick be debased or vilified; constantly tortured for their surrogate supposed female status. The balance of sexual dominance should be shared by both parties it sure would make for a better sex and who doesn't want that?

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Friends4Life

Sustaining Friendships within the Gay Community among Gay Black Men

By Sheldon Applewhite

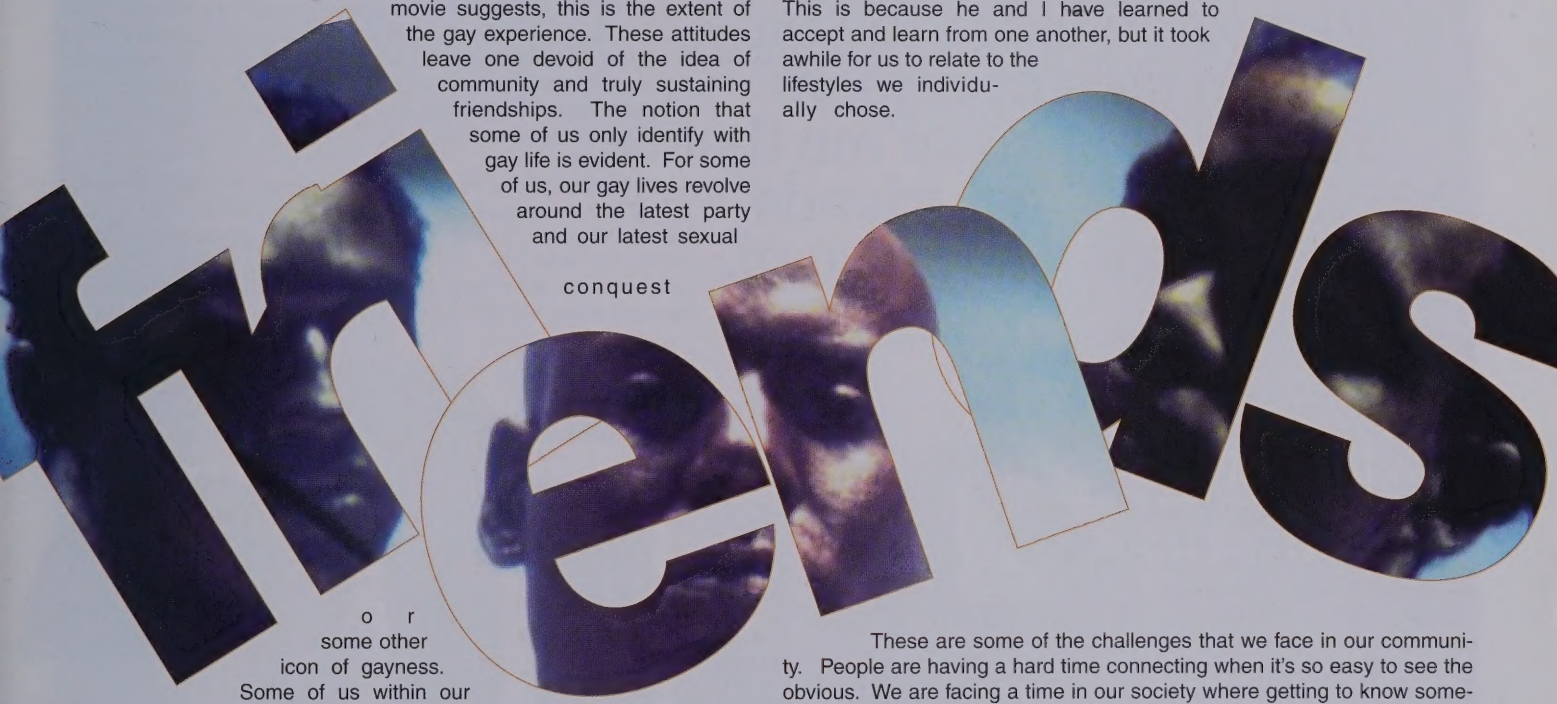
Establishing truly good friends in NYC is a difficult task. Between juggling friends from different boroughs and different times in your life (i.e. college to the real world), love interests and familial bonds, these "necessary" and "basic" relationships can find themselves victims of pure circumstance. Even more difficult a task is establishing and sustaining friendships with other men in the GBLT lifestyle. A lingering question is "How do we develop healthy, nurturing friendships in a community that can be as divisive as it is diverse?" If you think I am exaggerating, talk to your friends. Some of us won't go to certain clubs because it is too young, too old, or too out there. Some of us don't want to associate with others because they are "too femme", "butch", "dl" or whatever criteria for rejection we are applying at the moment. If we cannot even share the same space, how can we truly develop lasting friendships? Some of us cannot picture ourselves with anyone who is not thugged out, friendships included. Moreover, how can we love one another when some of us don't even like what we see within our own community? For some of us, what we see is a generalized idea of what it means to be Black, male and gay and these ideas are unacceptable to the larger black community. What those who choose this way of viewing their community, do is end up neatly categorizing a diverse community that cannot be monolithically stacked in a neat box.

My friends and I often joke about Sex and the City, the popular HBO series and its characters; we joke about the different characteristics of the characters that we take on in different scenarios. If one of us has been particularly sluttish or has done something fabulous, he will admit that he pulled "a Samantha". When it's time to be professional, you've pulled a Miranda. When one of acts prudish or bourgie, you're pulling a "Charlotte". Now I realize that this model is seemingly the furthest from black gay men out of any example you can come up with but one thing that stands out with the characters on the show is the depth of their friendship, which is what everyone wants in a friend. When I watch the show, it makes me think about friendships, the friends I have, the ones I have lost, and the ones that will last. I began to look at my friendships, how they came about and how I sustain them. So in Carrie-like fashion I ask the question: how do Black Gay Men sustain friendships in the face of masculinity and sexuality?

I turned to two gay popular culture movies to look at how gay friendships are sustained, "Punks" and "The Broken Hearts Club." "Punks" is an example of a movie that has gay black men shown in a positive light. It deserves merits for its depiction of black gay men on screen, displaying several different types of the black gay man in addition to the stereotypical model we normally see. But whether or not it reveals anything about the difficulties of mak-

ing and sustaining black male friendships remains to be seen. "Punks" succeeds primarily at showcasing the possibility of friendship, even with the differences that exist between the characters. While I am sure this diversity in friendship exists somewhere, is difficult to find in our community, particularly when you think about the many divisions that separate.

Maybe our friendships could be modeled after the movie "The Broken Hearts Club." This movie, about a bunch of gay male friends in Los Angeles, was heralded for its portrayal of gay men on the big screen. The main character of the movie, Dennis, on his 28th birthday, wonders what he truly has in common with his group of gay friends saying "the only thing I'm good at is being gay." The movie does a great job of examining why we choose the people we do to participate in our lives, but it doesn't address the particulars of maintaining black male friendships. For some though, like the movie suggests, this is the extent of the gay experience. These attitudes leave one devoid of the idea of community and truly sustaining friendships. The notion that some of us only identify with gay life is evident. For some of us, our gay lives revolve around the latest party and our latest sexual conquest or some other icon of gayness. Some of us within our community don't have any involvement with gay life, so friendships are unattainable. Without the support systems and networking that being a part of community can bring, some of us face isolation, a choice no one in the gay lifestyle should have to endure.



Many of us have high expectations for the friendships that we want. We also have preconceived notions of how we want our friends to behave, dress, say and value. Initially when I came out, there were four levels of friendships that I initially experienced: 1) fuck friends, 2) girlfriends, 3) DL fellas and the 4) party friends.

You have your "fuck friends. You know whom I am talking about here. These are the "friends" you meet who are interested in sex with you, and only interested in sex with you. No conversation, no hanging out, simply pipe-laying. For example, I remember this one brother who after dating for several weeks, told me that he was definitely interested in the sex, but the hanging out he could do without. I still see him when I go out to the clubs and still walk by him like we are complete strangers. Ask yourself how many times you have gone into a club and ran into someone that wouldn't so much as look you in the eye because they only wanted to have sex with you.

Then, you have your Party friends. These are the type of people that you have a good time with throughout they year, usually coinciding with the major black gay events: Memorial Day weekend, summers at the beach, Pride, and Labor Day. These are those friends that are great for clubbing, but you can't pay them to go to the latest art exhibit that has opened at the Guggie. They look great, wear the right clothes, have invitations to the best party and you would possibly sleep with them if you didn't know how much they got around. These are the guys that you want to be seen with at the right parties, but that's about all they are good for.

The other group of "friends" out there is the "dl brothas". These are your friends who wouldn't dare take you over their parent's house. These guys can't go to certain clubs with you because they might be spotted by "their peoples". You always have to meet them out somewhere. You butch up your voice when you call them, IF they give you their number. These are the brothas you may occasionally see with a girlfriend, wife and children. I have one friend who initially wouldn't meet me in our community because I was "too gay". Today, we are the best of friends. This is because he and I have learned to accept and learn from one another, but it took awhile for us to relate to the lifestyles we individually chose.

These are some of the challenges that we face in our community. People are having a hard time connecting when it's so easy to see the obvious. We are facing a time in our society where getting to know someone is frowned upon, unless it is in the most shallow, vapid way possible a la Jerry Springer: scandalous, sexual or confessional.

I mean, really, how can anyone possibly keep up with all of the "etiquette" of what it takes to make, nurture and sustain a friendship?

When we make distinctions on what is acceptable and unacceptable, when, where and under what circumstances that we will connect with another man, we lose something. I mean, really, how can anyone possibly keep up with all of the "etiquette" of what it takes to make, nurture and sustain a friendship? "Miss thing, I know she's not wearing that . . . Damn, he didn't go to college? Oh, I can't hang with him -ghetto rat!" What about all of the possibilities of friendship that we overlook because someone is 'too femme', 'ghetto', 'on the dl', 'breeder', etc.?

Agreed, it is important to evaluate your friendships, to decide who is truly worthy of your company based on the way you treat each other, your common interests etc. However, like romance, sometimes in our quest for the right type of friend, we miss the forest for the trees. In a city as large as NYC, finding people who are true friendship material is like having a snowball fight in hell. Despite the amount of people who live here, alienation can still take place. When I first moved back to NYC in 1997, it took me a good year to find people that I truly wanted to hang out with. As a frat boy, I always prized the way I was able to categorize my friends for the myriad of activities I planned in my personal life. There were brothers studied with, there were brothers hung out with and then there were brothers conversed with, deep, intellectual conversation when needed. I began to realize that

categorizing is no different in the gay lifestyle. The people I met seemed to base our newly budding friendships with me on a variety of factors: was I "masculine" enough? Did I wear the right clothes? Did I drive the right car? Did I say the right things? In my pursuit to fit in during a period of insecurity in a community that was new to me, I had to ask myself: did I let other people's values towards sustaining friendships question my ideals of what true friendship meant even if these values were contrary to my beliefs? No longer could categorize my new peers like I did on the heterosexual word for wanting to be accepted. The shoe was on the other foot. In my quest to find the "right friends", I began to question the notions of what a true friend meant to me. As I met new people, I began to redefine what friendships that I wanted to establish. One of the biggest preconceived notions that I had to come to grips with was my notion of femininity. I believe that our concept of this word can spill over into some of the choices we make as gay black men

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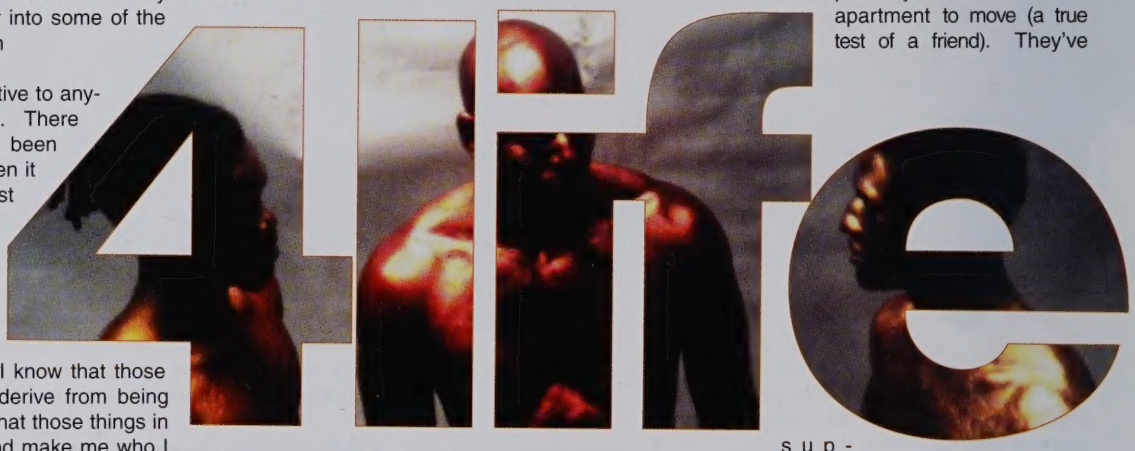
Growing up, I was especially sensitive to anyone referring to me as "feminine". There were times in my life that I have been teased about those things. So when it came to making friends who had just as much or more feminine qualities as I had, I ran the other way. I began to question what my fear of femininity and where it derived from in my life. I guess some of us feel that those of us with these qualities are trying to be female. I know that those feminine qualities that I possess derive from being raised by a female. Now I realize that those things in me are characteristics I cherish and make me who I am. These "traits" are more than simply lisping or switching. It involves the sensitive, nurturing characteristics that have been cultivated within me by my mother. We have been raised in a society where softness is equated with the perceived weakness and the loathing of this "weakness" manifests itself in our relationships, platonic or romantic. As men who love other men whether openly or in the closet, our reaction to this side of us is deceptive and destructive. By questioning the insecurity within myself, I began to become more comfortable with the "whole me." This is not to say that there isn't a growing period with establishing true friends. We constantly define and redefine what we want and need in our friendships. I have a friend that taught me to acknowledge the ugly, bad side of myself. This is the part of me that only my real friends get to see a glimpse of. It's not about keeping up appearances. Now, some people would easily dismiss this person as not worthy of their friendship. He can be effeminate at times, loud and crass. But what distinguishes him from the pack is his unwavering confidence in the face of all of the negative things that people might say about him. He has taught me that it's ok to laugh at yourself. Once he showed up at my house with a white tank top and orange boxers on during the summer, plums and all. He also hit on my step dad. But I learned this was his nature and I had to accept this about him even if I didn't always agree with it. He also taught me that we all have a little bit of bad in us at times, but we have to acknowledge that part of ourselves as well. He taught me to truly be proud of whom I am. He taught me to embrace the "whole" me.

Maybe the best models are our more experienced brothers out there in the gay community. For the last three years, I have attended a party during pride weekend. I am so inspired by the people who throw it because at this party there are these black men who are friends and they love one another. .The camaraderie is intoxicating when you walk in the room. During any given point in the night, you can walk in on conversation of people living lives to the fullest. Their friendships aren't based on cattiness or competition, but seem to be based on mutual respect, admiration and love. Now this is a model to learn from.

Maybe, it's hard to get past all of the vapid, shallow conversations, the sex-only relationships, "the party with, but part ways with afterwards" mentality and pettiness, because if we overcame these obstacles to truly rewarding relationships, then what would be left to separate us? Nothing! We tend to let our labels define us and shape our lives and the choices we make and the friends we choose. Let us choose our friends on the basis of how they will enrich our lives, make us better people. However, this is a personal decision.

I have a group of friends that I consider to be "friends4life". Friends4life are the girls (or guys if you prefer) that you go on vacation with, talk about trade with, explore your sexual conquests and letdowns with, invite to dinner parties and go to the movies with. Friends4life outlast places like Langston's, Chi Chi's and Rockwell's.

The friends I have made and sustained are an important part of my life because we can accept all sides of each other and not simply the parts of us that look pretty and presentable. These friends4life have seen the best and the worst of me. They have taken my keys when I had a little too much to drink. They've told me the truth when I've had no interest in it at all. They've helped me pack my entire apartment to move (a true test of a friend). They've



supported my decision to go back to school. We can be silly and act like characters from Sex and the City without judgment or reproach. They listen to me when I bitch about my relationship. But more importantly, they have the ability to see beyond the surface and embrace me. In a society, where we are constantly struggling to maintain our identities as strong black men, we need someone to keep reminding us that they know where you're coming from, because they're going through it too.

Instead of focusing on the things that separate us: the way someone dresses, the way they walk or talk, how masculine or feminine they are, we should begin to pay more attention to those things that bind us. I think about all of the things that I would have lost had I turned away from some of my friends because they aren't "bookish" like I am or that they have decided to stay in the closet a little longer than I have. Someone once said, "Friendships are fragile things, and require as much handling as any other fragile and precious thing". One of the sustaining forces in our community should be based on solidarity, love and friendship of our fellow black man and the struggle that we must face everyday.

So, maybe in some ways, the Sex and the City analogy does work for us, because the characteristics my friends and I follow the most are based on acceptance, love and understanding. Then again, life really isn't like a television show or movie. We have to live with the choices we make and can't simply tune in next week when we are trying to maintain relationships. Style over substance usually works best in fictional shows and movies. Or does it? You decide.

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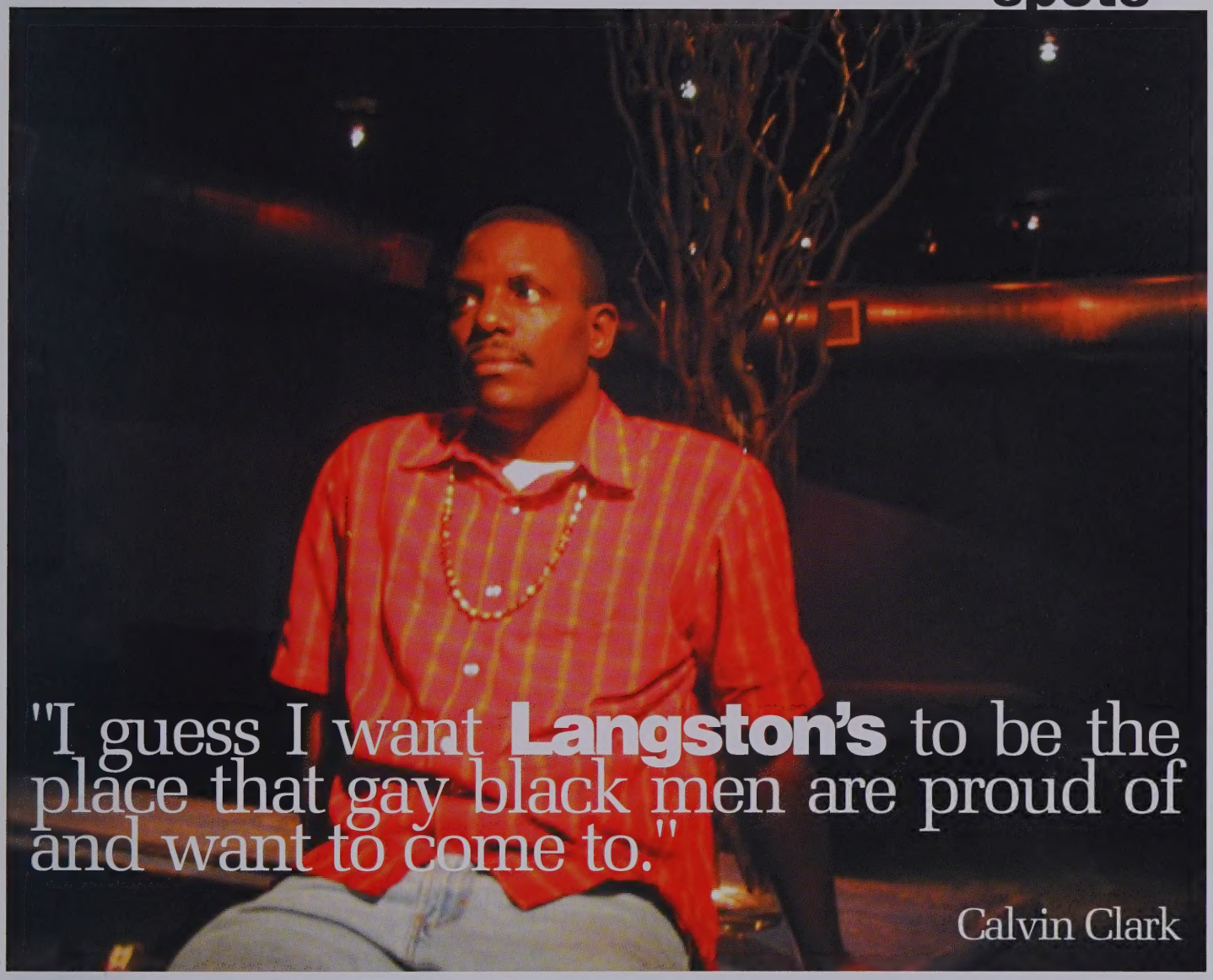


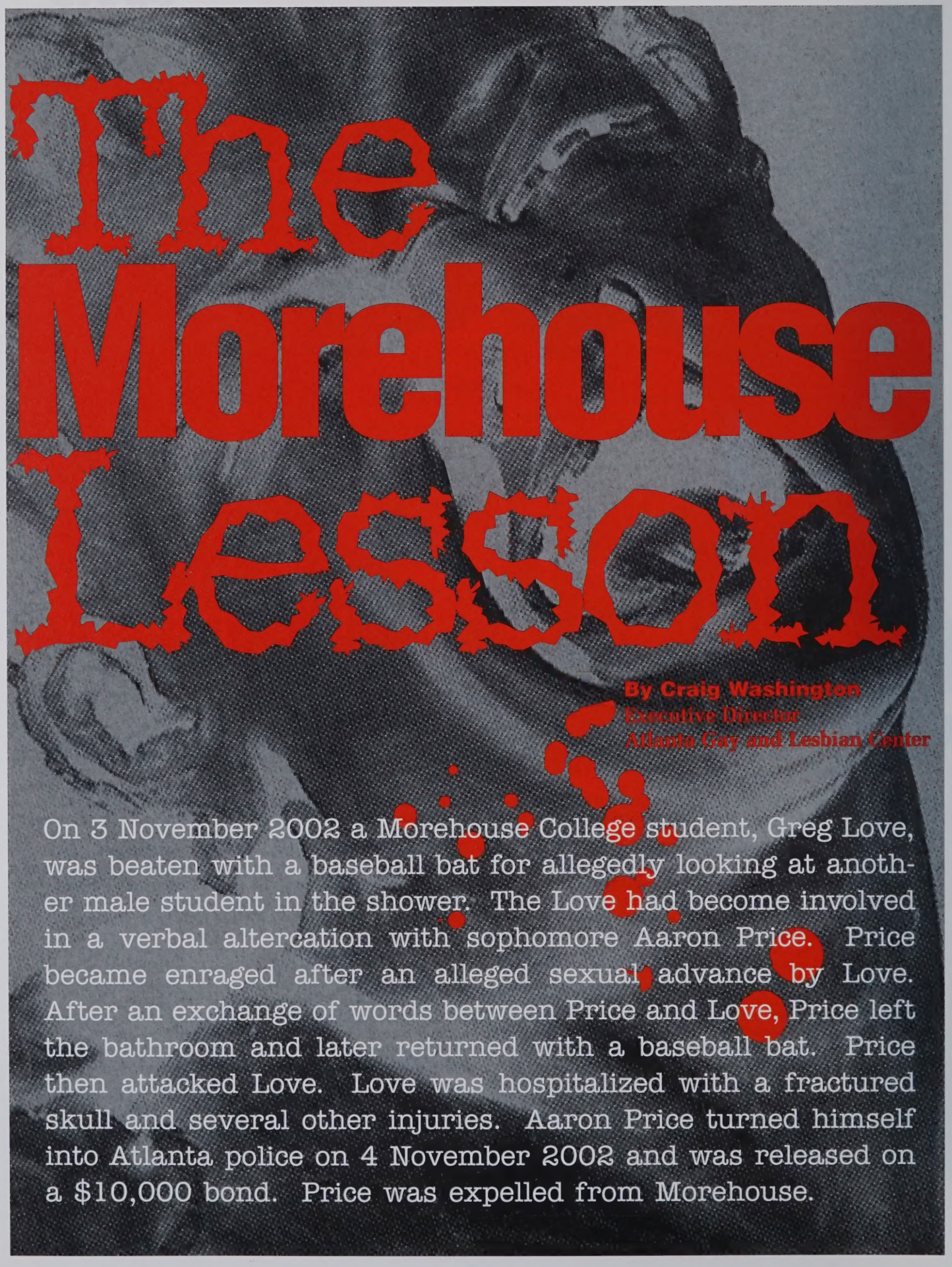
Most people probably do not think of a night club or bar as being integral parts of black gay life. Sure we meet dates there, sure we release stress and tension there, sure we socialize, drink and sometimes even drug there, but we leave the club at the club, going on with lives disconnected from the driving house or hip hop beats. Yet the truth of the matter is that, for many, gay clubs and bars are a pivotal part of the black gay social experience. These clubs sometimes provides one's initial contact with gay black life, sometimes providing the reveler their only acceptable means for meeting and connecting with other gay black men, and sometimes providing people their only gay "safe" space. Upon closer examination the club, and the atmosphere it creates, complete with the subtle subliminal, as well as overt, messages it sends has the potential to powerfully effect the ways in which we as gay black men relate to each other. No one understands this more than Calvin Clark, owner of Langston's bar and lounge. Celebrating its first year, Calvin hopes that Langston's has paved a foundation towards being more than just another bar in the New York City Black Gay Community.

Dirty bathrooms and discourteous staff, random straight clubs with promoters able to get only one random nights and were often what Calvin saw when he surveyed New York City's gay black nightlife offerings. For a while he planned and plotted, all the time wondering why there was no gay black clubs, owned by gay black men, servicing black gay clientele with the same appeal that clubs like Splash, or Monster did for the white gay community; Calvin meant to correct that situation. After a brief partnership in Brooklyn bar/club Rockwell's, in September 2001 Calvin opened Langston's in Bedford Stuyvesant/Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Not content to simply own a venue that provided nightly entertainment ranging from classic –old school house music to Hip-Hop to Reggae and other Caribbean rhythms Calvin is working diligently to make Langston's into a the type of place where brothers can come and truly connect with each other, in an atmosphere that is not only inviting but affirming. Langston has hosted events for local black gay organizations like Gay Men of African Decent and People of Color in Crisis, Inc. As well as being supportive of these institutions Langston's has hosted events that catered to Senior citizen members of the black community.

As you talk to Calvin you can see his excitement and commitment to the black gay community. He promises that Langston's first year is but a beginning. Langston's is committed to the black gay community and will be working on new and exciting events. People of Color in Crisis is proud to spot light Calvin Clark and Langston's Lounge Bar. Happy one year anniversary!

Langston's Weekly Line-up

Sunday Nights	Thuglife
Tuesday Nights	Addictive Tuesdays hosted by Harmonica Sunbeam
Wednesday Nights	Caribbean Wednesday
Thursday Nights	Male Revue
Friday Nights	Wear-U-Out Fridays with DJ Camron, DJ keith and DJ Tony
Saturday Nights	R&B and Hip-Hop



The Morehouse Lesson

By Craig Washington
Executive Director
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On 3 November 2002 a Morehouse College student, Greg Love, was beaten with a baseball bat for allegedly looking at another male student in the shower. The Love had become involved in a verbal altercation with sophomore Aaron Price. Price became enraged after an alleged sexual advance by Love. After an exchange of words between Price and Love, Price left the bathroom and later returned with a baseball bat. Price then attacked Love. Love was hospitalized with a fractured skull and several other injuries. Aaron Price turned himself into Atlanta police on 4 November 2002 and was released on a $10,000 bond. Price was expelled from Morehouse.

Since the November anti-gay beating at Morehouse College, one of the most revered black academic institutions in the nation has become the focus of national scrutiny. Were it not for the media alert by the adhoc committee of organizers and students known as ASSEFA (African Americans for a Safe Space for All), this attack (and several precedents) might have remained campus folklore. Even after DA Paul Howard announced that he would prosecute the attack as a hate crime, President Massey has yet to admit there has been a history of on-campus anti-gay abuse and that this crime was motivated by the perception that the victim was homosexual. Several factors may have contributed to his silences. Like most private schools, Morehouse would never voluntarily air its soiled linens. The association between Morehouse and homosexuality has been rumored for decades. But Morehouse administrators have rarely if ever publicly acknowledged its gay students, and it is after all a black private school. Like any prestigious academy, Morehouse values dearly its public image. It is a model historically black college who has given the world some of its most celebrated leaders and scholars. It prides itself on maintaining standards of academic excellence but its true mark of distinction is the sense of decorum and institutional loyalty instilled in generations of young men. The fabled "Morehouse man" is an enduring symbol of black male excellence that reflects traditional African American values and the behavior codes used to uphold them.

Sexuality in general and certainly homosexuality specifically, confound those codes that attempt to prescribe proper heterosexual behavior and prohibit improper heterosexual and all non-hetero sexuality and identity. The emergence of contemporary black male homosexual identities and culture is forcing all-black institutions to reexamine rigid norms of gender propriety and the related constructs of manhood. Increasingly many of those whom may not use the term "gay" to self-identify and are not ashamed of their sexuality are constructing self-affirming oases within these black spaces. This is what is happening at Morehouse College, which for the first time in its history now has an official gay student organization "Safe Space". As more black homosexuals, particularly youth, live their lives openly amongst other black people, more hetero black folks have had to interrogate or even deconstruct their own deeply ingrained biases. This eruption, this fairly new assertion of self-legitimized non-heterosexuals has also met with widespread resistance. Many straight Morehouse men resent the challenges to their heterosexist privilege that are presented by gays and women who will not be dominated, who will not stay in their place. Greg Love was perceived as not staying in his place. His alleged gaze at another man's naked body traverses the very boundaries that many heterosexual men feel entitled to cross when they openly glare at a Spelman student's behind. Yet because the gaze is unwanted (and/or socially opprobrious) and does not gratify heterosexual desire, it is a violation for which the gazer must be punished.

While black people may have traditionally embraced gays and lesbians among them, public dialogue about homosexuality arouses deep-seeded cultural anxieties. Although gays and lesbians have gained more acceptance over the last 20 years, non-heterosexual desire, behavior and identity are still heavily stigmatized throughout our society. Black people's self-consciousness about our image and the stalwart reluctance to air the proverbial dirty laundry (misogyny, sexual abuse) are partially rooted in the racism we have internalized. As with most Americans, we are further troubled by the fluid nature of sexuality, which often flouts the neat categories we've imposed to contain it. If student violence is a coffee spill on the cuff, troublesome but non-threatening, then homosexuality is a semen stain on the dress (or trousers), loaded with indictment, buried deep down in the basket.

The ensuing publicity has facilitated an abrupt "outing" of this institution, a public confirmation of the rumor that was more than "just a rumor". And to the extent that is a black institution, our community has been "outted", this time not by disease, but rather sexuality itself and the violence deployed to suppress it. As long as the young gay man stays in the closet, the family can sustain a self-perception of normalcy. His sexuality is not a problem for anyone else but him, the closet his cross to bear alone, the price he must pay for acceptance. Once he is out, the family must then speak to what had been known but resolutely unspoken, to deal with emotions that had been placated by denial. The greater family of black community is being called to come to terms with society's growing acceptance of gays and lesbians, the emergence of openly gay black people, and its widely varied beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality.

Many blacks who face racism daily are slow to confess the privileges they derive and the oppression they wield or tolerate within their own communities. Some black men who are well versed in their analysis of racism often do not recognize their own sexism and how black women are subjugated by it. Black heterosexual women may demonstrate an understanding of both racism and sexism and yet disclaim the parallel elements that comprise homophobia. People find it difficult to prioritize forms of oppression that do not directly affect them. More to the point, we often resist admitting to the privileges we access through our membership in certain "groups" i.e., whites, men, heterosexuals, rich people, Christians. It is easier to cite our status as victims as it incurs little if any responsibility.

As categories of identity, race and sexual orientation are in many ways dissimilar. Yet the correlative oppressions that target the respective minorities of these categories (black people and gays) have similar dynamics. Racism and homophobia are reinforced by stereotyping (black men are criminals/gays are child molesters) and blaming the victim (Emmet Till shouldn't have eyeballed a white woman/Greg Love shouldn't have eyeballed another man). The responses from several blacks emulate oppressor group behavior. For instance a Spelman student recently informed me of widespread speculation that Love physically harassed Aaron Price thereby instigating the attack. Given that there is no record of Love touching Price, it is highly likely that this rumor was inspired by an unarticulated desire to justify the crime. Just as many white people rush to blame black victims for being brutalized by racist police, and many men question what the rape victim was doing at her rapist's hotel room anyway, several heterosexuals are searching for any culpability they can pin on Love. If the act is warranted and thus not a crime, or if the motivation is refuted, then group members (whites/men/heterosexuals) do not have to admit to their own biases and the power they have to enforce them.

It is a reasonable assumption that if a black male student at, say, Emory University was beaten with a bat for looking at a white female student, several major black social justice organizations would be holding press conferences, marches and demonstrations all up and down that campus. No local or national non-gay black organizations have been quoted denouncing the specific nature of this attack. President Massey recently announced that he had convened a "blue ribbon panel" to address diversity issues. This panel has only one openly gay member, noted Harvard professor Peter Gomes, who wrote "The Good Book" which critiques how the Bible is used to address social issues. Imagine how enraged many blacks would be if a white college (prompted by the racist attack of a black student) assembled a panel to address racism and included only one black person. Although he stated his "willingness to engage gay and lesbian organizations," Massey has not returned any phone calls from the Atlanta Gay and Lesbian Center or ASSEFA and no local black gays or lesbians were asked to serve on the panel.

Hopefully Morehouse and the black community at large will learn from the lessons this experience offers. We who strive for social justice for all and not only our constituency cannot remain bound by the constraints of our comfort zones. Black people have to risk stepping into unchartered territory and look past oppression hierarchies ("your blues ain't as bad as mine") that blur the common vision of the disenfranchised. When a colleague advised me to be patient with Morehouse since "they were not prepared to deal with this," I recalled how often freedom fighters were cautioned to "go slow" forty years ago. As with many of life's demands, social change does not wait for us to be prepared to fight for it. This incident is a calling and we must muster the courage to look first inward and unload the prejudice that infects us as individuals and as a society, right now. If civil rights workers had waited until blacks were prepared to fight for freedom, and whites were prepared to confront racism, many of us might still be riding at the back of the bus. b

Mr. Washington was born and lovingly raised by Anna and Leon Washington in Queens, New York and has lived in Atlanta for 10 years. His writings have been published in Arise, Clikque, Southern Voice, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and Venus Magazine. He currently serves as executive director for the Atlanta Gay and Lesbian Center and may be reached at cwash360@cs.com.

On Saturday, 7 December 2002 Curt Parrish passed away. Curt has had a long history of working with Black Gay men and has been an integral part of the struggle to enrich the quality of our lives. Curt Parrish activist, friend, family member will be missed by all whose life he has touched. People of Color in Crisis, Inc. would like to extend a heartfelt condolence to the friends and family of Curt Parrish.